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ABSTRACT

Since both good and poor reading achievement have been produced with any one of several developmental reading approaches, teacher characteristics are thought to be an important, however seldom tested, variable in reading achievement. A study conducted by the author which employed the author constructed Teacher Effort Scale in Reading indicated that high teacher effort correlated positively with the reading achievement of classes. The teachers judged to be high effort versus low effort teachers in reading expended a high degree of effort while attempting to individualize instruction in their classes. Four subscales of the rating scale noted efforts to: (1) secure and utilize a variety of materials; (2) provide differentiated instruction; (3) keep records of student progress; and (4) arrange conferences dealing with an individual student's progress. The success of the high effort teacher in the study cited lends increased support for the training of teachers to William Powell's "automatic" level where the teacher blends knowledge and action together and to Arthur Gates' observance in 1937 that success in reading depends on the effectiveness of the teacher, the availability and effective use of materials, and the adherence to individual differences. (MKM)

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The Successful Teacher of Reading: An Optimistic Explainer of Variance

by

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The Successful Teacher of Reading:
An Optimistic Explainer of Variance

Recent major studies in developmental reading find no significant differences between a wide variety of current approaches. Any one approach produced good results in some classes and poor results in others over a wide range of dependent variables. Such findings cause these researchers to hypothesize that it is the teacher rather than the method that may account for most of this variance. Unfortunately, there is little empirical data assessing aspects of teacher behavior in the teaching of reading. Moreover, only a small number of studies have chosen to test relationships between teacher behavior and student achievement and the researchers who have elected this direction have been in the main unsuccessful.

In a recent study conducted by this investigator (Blair, 1975) directed toward which teacher characteristics make a difference in reading and what relationships exist between teacher performance and student achievement, teachers who exerted more effort in selected areas in the teaching of reading produced significantly higher reading achievement scores in their classes than did teachers who exerted a lesser amount of effort.

It is obvious to anyone connected with schools that

teachers vary with respect to effort or energy expended on the job. This writer has observed at least three different types of teachers with respect to the amount of effort exercised in the classroom. The first group of teachers is characterized by those who perform less than the minimum requirements of the job. These teachers are few in number but do exist and will continue to exist because of many factors. Among these reasons are the weak entrance requirements and programs of some teacher education institutions. The second group of teachers, and probably the largest in number, consists of those who perform the minimum requirements satisfactorily. These teachers rarely go beyond the principle of a fair day's work for a fair day's pay. The third group of teachers is characterized by the effort of going beyond the minimum requirements of the job. These teachers are small in number and are identifiable by a high degree of commitment to their positions. Teachers in this category plainly work harder before school, during school and after school. However, it is clear that not all of the extra efforts made by these persons is especially helpful. Sometimes extra efforts serve other purposes: they act as "window dressings" -- cosmetic but not really very effective. The current study was an attempt to find out which efforts are apparently more important than others in the teaching of reading.

A scale for assessing teacher effort in reading was developed for this study. The Teacher Effort Scale In Reading

has four sub-scales entailing efforts to: secure and utilize a variety of materials; provide differentiated instruction; keep records of student progress; and arrange conferences dealing with an individual student's progress. The investigator designed the scale to differentiate between those teachers who manifested much effort in their work in each of the four selected areas from those who did not.

Five reading consultants in a suburban New England town rated their primary and middle grade teachers on the Teacher Effort Scale In Reading. Two distinct groups of teachers were formed as a result of the ratings: Nineteen High Effort and eighteen Low Effort teachers of reading. The mean achievement scores on the Stanford Achievement Test of High Effort and Low Effort teachers were analyzed by using a two-way analysis of co-variance technique. The sub-scales comprised four areas where teachers have the opportunity to expend visible effort in individualizing instruction during their reading class. Most teachers expend effort in the four areas mentioned above in various degrees. The teachers judged to be High Effort teachers in reading expended a high degree of effort while attempting to individualize instruction in their classes.

The components of the effort scale are supported by numerous experts in the field. Powell (1969) feels teachers can work at different levels of effectiveness in their teaching. He notes that they "can function at a verbal level, a performance level, or an automatic level". At the verbal

level, the teacher uses the educational jargon but does not know the meaning nor application of such terms. The performance level has within it two stages. At the lower level, the teacher has the knowledge but does not use it in the classroom. At the higher level, the teacher has the knowledge but makes only minimal use of it in the classroom. The automatic level of effectiveness is the level where the true diagnostician is operating. Here the teacher blends all the skills, techniques, strategies, knowledge, and positive attitudes together. Results of the present study lend increased support for the training of teachers at the "automatic" level.

One frequently hears that we in the educational profession do not know what makes an effective teacher of reading. This may be an erroneous and cowardly assertion. In essence, the results of this study confirm what Arthur Gates said almost forty years ago. His contributions to the field of reading have been of great significance. In fact, he certainly was a "man ahead of his time". Many so called "new ideas" in reading being proclaimed today Gates himself uttered in the 1930's and 1940's. While investigating the necessary mental age required for success in beginning reading, Gates in 1937, concluded that success in reading depends greatly on the type and quality of instruction.

In essence, Gates told us that the mental age of students is correlated highly with success in reading. However, equally important is the type of teaching, the effectiveness and

expertise of the teacher, the availability and effective use of materials, and the adherence to individual differences in a particular reading program. Besides showing that a mental age of 6.5 was not required for success in reading, Gates turned attention away from the child, toward the type and quality of instruction. Commenting on the findings of the study, Gates wrote:

> The most significant finding is the fact that the correlations between mental age and reading achievement were highest in the classes in which the best instruction was done and the lowest in those in which the poorest instruction was provided. More specifically, the magnitude of the correlation seems to vary directly with the effectiveness of the provision for individual differences in the classroom.

Finally, the relationship between effort and achievement simply makes good sense. As teachers make use of all the pedagogical tools available to them, it is reasonable to assume their efforts will pay off in school achievement. Teaching reading is a decision-making process and the judgments teachers make during it are the real keys to the success or failure of their program. While many perhaps will argue that studying "effort" belabors the obvious, a great many "obvious" propositions accepted through the ages as truisms were found to be false when put to empirical tests. "Homogeneous grouping" is a practice that has a great deal of obviousness built into it but it has failed continually in experiments to demonstrate efficacy. Furthermore, the notion of effort is an optimistic

criterion (one which teachers can do something about immediately) unlike IQ which cannot be manipulated by professionals.

While acknowledging that we teachers of reading have a long way to go, we must stand up and say that we do indeed know some characteristics of the effective reading teacher. No matter what the method or class organization, we do know that instruction geared to meet individual needs through a level of effort committed to individualization will pay off in higher student achievement scores. Teachers of reading who take the time and effort to teach diagnostically, to utilize a variety of materials to meet individual needs, to differentiate instruction according to the ability levels in their classes, to keep records on students' work and to maintain close contact with interested parties concerning an individual student's progress or lack of progress will have a positive effect on student achievement. In other words, one key to being an effective reading teacher is the application of a high degree of effort or commitment. Teachers should realize that this effort is crucial and in what areas it should be expended.

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